

# Regime Theory Thirty Years On: Taking Stock, Moving Forward

Written by Oran R. Young

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/18/regime-theory-thirty-years-on-taking-stock-moving-forward/>

ORAN R. YOUNG, SEP 18 2012

The 30th anniversary of the *International Organization* special issue on international regimes[1] provides a good opportunity to take stock of the substantial stream of regime analysis that has developed over the last several decades and to consider whether this stream has run its course or continues to offer a source of inspiration for researchers interested in understanding the conditions governing international cooperation. It is worth noting at the outset that those of us who developed regime analysis as a way to structure our work in the 1970s and contributed articles to the special issue of *International Organization* in 1982 had no idea how this research program would take off during the remainder of the 1980s and beyond. We knew from the outset, of course, that regime analysis would be helpful as a means of getting around the formalism that marked much work on international organizations at the time and that it could provide the basis for thinking about what we have come to refer to as governance without government at the international level.[2] But we did not anticipate that regime analysis would become intertwined with the rise of international political economy and international environmental governance as vibrant fields of study and provide intellectual capital that would prove valuable to the rapidly growing community of researchers working in these fields.

Regime analysis has had its detractors as well as its advocates more or less from the outset. Susan Strange's warning about dragons and the dangers of faddism in her contribution to the 1982 special issue remains one of the most forceful neo-realist critiques of the basic premise of regime analysis concerning the roles that institutions play as determinants of the course of international affairs.[3] John Mearsheimer presented a similar neo-realist attack in the mid-nineties in his critique of what he characterized as the "false promise" of international institutions.[4] More recently, the chorus of skeptics has grown, though it is often difficult to tell whether those who have joined this number have something new to contribute to the debate or are merely influenced by the faddishness of a discipline that seems to require an infusion of new analytical frameworks from time to time to create a sense of intellectual vigor.

In this short essay on the achievements of regime theory and its prospects going forward, I address three questions. What is at stake in the debates about international regimes and about the significance of the work of those who study them? What have we learned about this matter over the last 3-4 decades from both qualitative and quantitative studies of international institutions? Does regime theory have a future as a productive research program as we move deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? For those who know my work, it will come as no surprise that I believe this line of thinking deals with issues of fundamental importance that are not going to go away anytime soon. But let me endeavor to encapsulate my views on these questions and to present the case for regime analysis in the form of responses to the three questions.

### What is at stake?

The crux of the debate regarding the contribution of regime analysis centers on the role of social institutions as determinants of the course of interactions among the actors in international society. To understand the significance of this issue, it is helpful to start with some definitions. Institutions are assemblages of rights, rules, and decisionmaking procedures that give rise to social practices, assign roles to the participants in these practices, and regulate

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interactions among them. Regimes, on this account, are institutions that are specialized to a particular issue (e.g. the nuclear nonproliferation regime, the trade regime, the regime for stratospheric ozone) or a spatially defined area (e.g. the regime for Antarctica, the regime for the North Sea). Whereas institutions are assemblages of rights, rules, and decisionmaking procedures, organizations are material entities that have offices, personnel, budgets, and legal personality. Many institutions include organizations (e.g. the WTO, the secretariat of the UNFCCC) that play significant roles in administering their provisions or depend on separate organizations (e.g. UNEP in the case of the ozone regime) to play these roles. But this is not always the case. As a result, the relationship between institutions and organizations emerges as an important focus of analysis rather than a matter to be disposed of by definition.[5]

With these definitions in hand, we can return to the question of what is at stake in thinking about the contribution of regime analysis. Views regarding the role of social institutions vary dramatically. Douglass North, for example, explains the rise of the West from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onward largely in terms of institutional developments mainly having to do with systems of property rights.[6] The recent work of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson broadens this line of analysis, accounting for the success and failure of nations largely in terms of the extent to which economic and especially political institutions are inclusive or exclusive.[7] James March and Johan Olsen develop a somewhat more nuanced version of this line of analysis with particular reference to what they call “international political orders.”[8] Writers like Strange and Mearsheimer, by contrast, stress the role of power as the principal driver of the course of world affairs. In essence, their argument is that institutions including regimes are epiphenomena. They are simply surface manifestations of underlying configurations of power; they change over time in response to shifts in the configuration of power in international society and are not major determinants of outcomes in their own right. Seeking a middle ground, Stephen Krasner, the editor of the special issue of *International Organization*, introduced the idea of regimes as intervening variables.[9] On this account, other forces, such as geopolitics, population, or technology, constitute the basic drivers in international society. But regimes can play a role in steering human interactions, influencing the impacts of the basic drivers in the process. Given this array of views, the challenge before us is to sort out these diverging perspectives on the role of institutions with particular reference to international society. One concrete way to pose the issue is to ask: what proportion of the variance in the outcomes of interactions among the actors in international society can we attribute to the influence of international regimes?

## What have we learned?

So, what have we learned in the course of the last thirty years that can shed light on this issue? Regime analysis has spawned a large literature, much of it dealing with international economic regimes and environmental regimes but extending also to include accounts that deal with security regimes and human rights regimes. Much of this literature is qualitative in nature and therefore somewhat difficult to assess in terms of the production of cumulative results. But there is also a growing body of quantitative studies dealing with international regimes, making it possible to compare and contrast conclusions arising from both qualitative and quantitative research. Some of the resultant studies are largely descriptive; others treat regimes as dependent variables in the sense that they endeavor to explain the formation and evolution of these institutional arrangements rather than to examine the roles that regimes play as drivers of the outcomes of interactions in international society. Still, there is now enough literature on the roles that regimes play as drivers of the course of international affairs to allow for some assessment of the challenge described in the preceding section.[10]

It should come as no surprise that our conclusions about the role of institutions as drivers of outcomes in international society are mixed. There is sufficient evidence to say with some confidence that international regimes do make a considerable difference under a range of conditions but that they certainly do not account for all of the variance in the outcomes of interactions among the actors in international society. Other factors, including those included in the familiar I = PAT formula as well as biogeophysical conditions, culture, the weight of history in the form of path dependence, and leadership, also make a difference.[11] Nor is there a single unambiguous mechanism through which regimes influence the course of interactions in international society. The distinction that March and Olsen introduce between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness is clearly relevant in this connection.[12] More generally, we can say that accounts based solely on utilitarian reasoning, which stress the role of incentives, calculations of benefits and costs, and the idea of rational choice, cannot account for all the consequences of social institutions. Yet the relative importance of what we often describe as collective-action models

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and social-practice models of institutional consequences remains an area requiring additional research.[13]

One of the most significant findings arising from regime analysis centers on the role of what we have come to think of as complex causality. The essential idea here is relatively easy to describe but difficult to deal with in the conduct of research on international affairs. Drivers like biogeophysical conditions, population, and technology clearly influence the character of the social institutions that emerge in various settings. But the converse is also true; institutions can have far-reaching impacts on these other factors.[14] Technology constitutes a case that is easy to understand, since institutional arrangements involving systems of patents and copyrights can have consequences for the development of new technologies that are fairly easy to document. But institutions can also influence demographic trends by structuring incentives relating to procreation and the significance of natural resource endowments by creating trade regimes that allow for the exchange of goods and services. One implication of this phenomenon is that it is not particularly useful to ask whether or not regimes make a difference and to expect a yes or no answer. The reality is that we need to focus our attention on the operation of causal clusters in which institutional arrangements are significant elements but by no means the whole story. This observation has important methodological implications as well. Complex causality presents difficulties for those used to using familiar statistical methods like multiple regression. This has given rise to a realization that we need to enlarge our toolkit of methods by supplementing the usual collection of qualitative and quantitative methods with additional procedures such as Charles Ragin's Qualitative Comparative Analysis or QCA.[15]

## What should we do now?

Does regime theory have a future as a productive mode of analysis for students of international relations? Or should we conclude that this research program has run its course so that we would be well-advised to move on to greener intellectual pastures at this stage? While alternative approaches are certainly worth pursuing, I would argue that regime analysis still has much to offer. There is no basis for adopting the view that institutions constitute a kind of master variable as scholars like North and Acemogul and Robinson suggest in their accounts of the rise of the West. But there is much to be learned about the roles that institutions play in causal mixes of the sort that are pervasive in international society. An attractive feature of regime analysis in this connection is that it is compatible with many varieties of neo-realism and constructivism as well as neo-liberal institutionalism. It is clear that institutions are often established by actors or groups of actors capable of wielding power effectively, even when these arrangements acquire staying power and continue to exert influence long after their creators have disappeared from the scene or faded into the background. Similarly, all social institutions rest on ideas, even when they have been around so long that it is difficult to ascertain the origins of the relevant ideas and trace the pathways through which they became influential. To my way of thinking, a research program that can profit from the insights of alternative schools of thought rather than becoming enmeshed in the sectarian battles among them has much to recommend it.

Finally, it seems to me that the future of regime analysis will be affected profoundly by its usefulness in addressing two developments in international society that are already important and that are destined to influence the character of this social setting profoundly in the future. One is the increasing complexity of international society as it shifts from being a society of states to a much more complex society in which states continue to be important actors but a variety of others actors including multinational corporations and a wide range of nongovernmental organizations become major players in their own right.[16] There is nothing in this transition to suggest a diminution of the role of social institutions. But it will challenge regime analysis to move beyond its mainstream focus on international regimes as arrangements in which the principal actors are nation states. The other development centers on the consequences arising from the onset of a world dominated by human actions up to the level of the Earth System or what we have come to think of as a new era called the Anthropocene. Of course, the case of climate change is emblematic of this development. But human domination has become a fact of life in a wide variety of domains. The significance of this development with regard to the issues under consideration in this essay stems from the fact that the Anthropocene is likely to be characterized by rising levels of turbulence and patterns of change that are non-linear, sometimes abrupt, and often irreversible.[17] There is nothing in this development that suggests that the role of social institutions as determinants of outcomes in international society will decline. But it seems likely that we will find ourselves facing a challenging situation in which existing institutions are not well equipped to address the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially if ways to restructure these institutions to improve their performance cannot be found. Consider the case of

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climate change in which conflicts of interest have prevented the Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC from reaching agreement on the measures needed to strengthen the regime as a prominent example. To the extent that this is the case, understanding the roles that institutions play as determinants of the course of international affairs will be a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for coming up with solutions to our predicament.

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